THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

MORE THAN MORALITY

February 7, 1999
John M. Buchanan

As an epiphany of God, Jesus discloses that at the center of everything is a reality that is in love with us and wills our well-being. As an image of God, Jesus challenges the most widespread image of reality in both the ancient and modern world, countering conventional wisdom's understanding of God as one with demands that must be met by the anxious self in search of its own security. In its place is an image of God as the compassionate one who invites people into a relationship which is the source of transformation of human life in both its individual and corporate aspects.

Marcus Borg
Jesus, A New Vision

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Matthew 5:13-20

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:20 (NRSV)

> Startle us, O God, with your truth and your goodness and your love for the world, for all your people, and for us. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the best preachers around these days, tells a story about how the preacher can get in the way of the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. She said:

> "My sister Kate, who—like me—did not grow up in church, began attending one after her son, Will, was born. Trying to downplay my delight, but eager to talk to her about it, I asked her one day which service they attended. 'Neither one,' she said. 'We just go to Sunday School and then we go home.' When I asked her why, she told me how they had gone to church at first, and how she had sat there Sunday after Sunday listening to the preacher vent his spleen at God's enemy of the week—alcohol, the lottery, gay people, Santa Claus—until she felt like she had been beaten with a stick.
>
> 'One day,' she said, 'I stood up in the middle of the sermon, put my hands over Will's ears and led him out of the church. Now we just go to Sunday School and we're all a lot happier.'" (*When God is Silent*, p. 21).

It is so easy to allow religion to become moralistic; to reduce the good news about God's love and mercy and grace to a list of dos and don'ts. Instead of sitting in church feeling unspeakably grateful, we feel guilty, our spirits anxious about our prospects in light of our moral failures. It is so easy to change religion from a celebration of God's love into a system of laws by which to please and satisfy God.

The issue is as old as the Bible itself. God's people lived as a nation and as individuals under God's law: the Ten Commandmanents, the Pentatuch—the first five books of our Bible which include the Levitical Code, regulating all of life, from diet to hygiene to sexual behavior to worship to farming and family life. The law—God's plan for God's people—is called Torah. It is revered in Israel. It is God's sweetest and most precious gift. It is the secret to happiness, peace, salvation. It is what makes God's people unique. To learn and study and teach the Torah is life's highest calling. A rabbi is a teacher. A synagogue is a school where Torah is read and studied and taught.

"I will keep your law continually, forever
and ever." the Psalmist wrote.
"I find my delight in your commandments,
because I love them."
(Psalm 119:44, 47, 48)

Alongside that tradition of religious law, however, there is a parallel tradition, a critique. The prophets see the law becoming an end in itself and leading the people away from God. Isaiah, Micah, Amos deliver blistering condemnations of religion focused entirely on statute keeping, rule obeying, ceremony performing.

"This is the fast I choose," Isaiah thundered,
"to loose the bonds of injustice,
. . . to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your
house." (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Walter Brueggemann observes that the prophets indict even passionate, elaborate religion that is essentially self-serving. "Such religion, while zealous and scrupulous, is dishonest because it is done only to enhance self and, therefore, is phony." (*Texts for Preaching*, p. 128).

The religious law has an inherent tendency to miss the point, to become a way of securing one's salvation, or at least one's position in the community, rather than serving as evidence of God's goodness and love and an expression of grateful human response to God's grace. That dynamic is so powerful that it even changes the way people think about God, their theology, their personal image of God. Think about it. Think how easy and almost natural it is to imagine God as a judge, a law giver, the supreme being whose primary interest in us is to see that we are behaving ourselves.

In a wonderful essay on perfectionism, author Anne Lamott writes:

"Now, it might be that your God is an uptight, judgmental perfectionist . . . . But a priest friend of mine has cautioned me away from the standard God of our childhoods, who loves and guides you and then, if you are bad, roasts you. God as high school principal in a gray suit who never remembered your name but is always leafing unhappily through your files. If this is your God, maybe you need to blend in the influence of someone who is ever so slightly more amused by you, someone less (uptight). Gracie Allen is good. Mr. Rogers will work."
(*Bird by Bird*, p. 30-31).

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees," Jesus said, "you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What do you suppose he could have meant? The scribes and Pharisees were the best people around, the most moral, the ones who kept every single provision of the law, performed every ritual, observed every festival. They could be a little severe perhaps, but they were good people, responsible, generous, civic-minded, kind. "Pharisaic" has become a pejorative word for us, meaning pompous, self-righteous. Jesus was particularly critical of that characteristic whenever he encountered it. In fact,

when Jesus got angry and critical and judgmental, it was almost always in response to someone's self-righteousness—"Whitewashed tombs," he called them one day; or people using the ceremonial law for their own self-aggrandizement, as the sellers of pigeons and doves in the Temple were doing. But by and large, Pharisees were good, solid people. I've always thought of them as the Presbyterians of their day.

So, how in the world do you become more righteous, more moral, than they were? Whatever did he mean? Well, he did not mean, as some people have tried to have it, that the law is invalid, that there are no rules to be obeyed, that we can all be guided by our own consciences and opinions and feelings, by that ubiquitous '60s mantra, "If it feels good, do it." He put the record straight on that: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17).

So what he's talking about is a way of living that gets at the law's true purpose and avoids the tendency of legalistic religion to miss the point and become self-righteous along the way. It's law with grace added. It is a new righteousness that exceeds the goodness attained by obeying rules. It is, pardon the expression, a <u>new</u> morality, whose very basis is a new justice defined as love; justice as something more than obeying rules and paying the price when you breech them.

You simply cannot exceed the righteousness of scribes and Pharisees. They are the champions. Unless, there is a new kind of righteousness in play now, a new way of thinking about morality, about what God wants of us and ultimately about who God is.

That's what is going on, I believe, when Jesus talks about a righteousness that exceeds that of the most virtuous people in the world. He wants something more, something different. He wants us to live by a new standard, to live in a new situation, a new world, which he called the Kingdom of God. He wants us to know about a different image of God—God as love, God as one who cares about moral standards, but cares even more about people.

That new and different law is often in conflict with conventional morality. "Yes, but," is how the conflict is expressed conversationally. "Yes, we should forgive, but he has to pay the price." "Yes, I believe in reconciliation, but not until he apologizes, again, or more, or louder." "Yes, I think love is a good idea, but...." You know the definition of "but," don't you? "But" means, "Disregard what I just said, here comes what I really believe." "Yes, I like you a lot, but there's just no room for you at our table." "Yes, I love you, but I have to go to the game with the boys." "Yes, I think love is a good idea, but we have to obey the law."

Jesus was not a moral anarchist. He would not have abrogated the law against murder, stealing, adultery, nor can human community exist for long with everyone doing what he or she believes is right and feels like doing. But he did say that he wanted more than obedience to the law. He did, in fact, on occasion break religious law—when the law seemed to conflict with a higher order. He did break law by eating with and touching unclean people and by healing on the sabbath.

There apparently is a higher morality for Jesus. It is the law of God's love—unconditional, all inclusive, no-strings-attached love—and it is what distinguishes his followers when they

are at their best, which is not often because we have been so busy, historically, being self-righteous.

There is, says theologian Douglas John Hall, a great hunger in the land for an authentic morality. He wrote that long before the presidential impeachment trial, which, if anything, has made that hunger for authentic morality even more intense.

We want more than President Clinton has demonstrated. More, in fact, than many of his predecessors demonstrated. And we want more from some of those who are prosecuting the case; more than the vindictive, self-righteousness of his most vocal critics and tormentors. We want something more, I believe. Something deeper and more profound; not moral anarchy, obviously, but not simple legalism either.

The President's pastor, J. Phillip Wogaman, a distinguished scholar of Christian ethics and author of many books on the topic, said it eloquently. "The deepest question of all, 'Do we ultimately see ourselves as a community based on law, or is there a deeper sense in which we are a community of mutual caring?'" (*From the Eye of the Storm*, p. 12).

Obviously, we cannot exist as a nation without a profound respect for law. But at the same time, we are called by Jesus Christ to something more than that, to a higher morality of love and kindness and fairness and concern for one another.

What does that mean? How does it work? Punishment for breaking rules may provide a kind of social control, but it does not foster moral growth. Moral philosophers know that there is a very significant difference between moral behavior performed out of fear of being caught and punished and moral behavior done for love. Wogaman wrote, "The heart of morality is in our response to love. It is not in the sheer force of will power to obey moral or civil laws. Deep repentance is an act of recovered love." (p. 62).

We know that in our own experience. The issue is not a rule broken, but love violated. Across the street from our house, neighbors were laying a beautiful, brand new sidewalk. My father, who one time had taught me how to write my initials in our own freshly poured concrete—in fact, had helped my brother and me put our hand prints and initials and the date in a single slab of concrete beside our house—my father saw in all that fresh cement across the street an emerging disaster, and told me specifically, "Don't do it. Don't put your initials in that sidewalk. Don't even think about it." Well, St. Paul was right, "The good I would . . . I do not. The evil I would not . . . that is what I do." I did it. The neighbor knew exactly who "JMB" was, spoke with my father, who then asked me, "Did you do it? Did you put your initials in the sidewalk?" And I said, "No, I did not." He knew I did it. He knew I was now guilty of two offenses. I broke a rule, and now I was lying about it. And he did the most amazing thing. He said, "All right. I believe you." And that is what he told our neighbor. I can't imagine what that cost him emotionally. But he said, "My son said he didn't do it, and I believe him." And his love broke my heart; not the rules I violated, or the lie I told, but love—love that trusts, risks, sacrifices, takes on the guilt of the other. That love I have never forgotten. I could have been made to pay a price—corporal punishment, being grounded, made to do compensatory work, all of which would have been experienced and forgotten. What I have never forgotten was his love, and over the

years, when I was there for a visit, I walked across the street many times to see if those initials, now faded and barely visible, are still there. They are.

What Jesus Christ brings is not more and better moral rules, but deeper, more profound relationship with God, based not on our goodness but on God's love. And his new and greater morality is based on that love and its power to change us and to create for us a new world.

The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called Jesus' new moral expectations an "Impossible Possibility," and wrote:

> "The gospel is something more than the law of love. The gospel deals with the fact that people violate the law of love. The gospel presents Christ as the pledge and revelation of God's mercy which finds us in our rebellion and overcomes our sin." (*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr,* R. McAfee Brown, p.111).

That, finally, is the issue; a love that can be embodied in the moral laws by which we live, but a love that transcends the rules, the law, and reaches into our hearts; a love that finds us; a love that overcomes our stubbornness, our pride, our sin; a love that never lets us go.

Amen.